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ABSTRACT

Many credible sources refer to the various immigrant groups in a derogatory manner. Negative citations can be categorized in numerous ways. They might arise as a result of the geographic origin of the ethnic group; attraction to a particular occupation class; peculiarity of custom; religious or political affiliation; rate of delinquency, crime, or illiteracy; or physical appearance. The subtleties of degradation can take form in the seemingly innocuous omission or casual treatment of the origin of persons of distinguished achievement. Within the parameters encompassing the extremes of subtle and flagrantly obvious discrimination there exist numerous forms of ethnic degradation which might be categorized as (1) occupation class stereotyping; (2) stereotyping by perceived "natural" inclination; (3) stereotyping in terms of illiteracy, crime, or delinquency; and (4) stereotyping by using a generally derogatory characterization. Steps are now being taken to alleviate future degradation and also to provide members of certain ethnic minorities with the justice of a well-deserved positive ethnic identity and heritage on which to look back. The time has come for educators to utilize the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students as a vehicle to enrich American society because of, not in spite of, their ethnic heritage. (Examples of derogatory statements in literature toward Italians and Italian-Americans are given.) (RC)

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Degradation: A Case Study Calling for Ethnic Education

by

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for

The Italian Heritage Series
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While gathering data for a presentation to be made in conjunction with the Italian Heritage Series sponsored by a grant from the Maine Humanities Council,[1] I was struck by the number of "credible" sources which referred to the various immigrant groups in a derogatory manner.

The negative connotations which were encountered ranged along a continuum which included examples of blatantly obvious references concerning ethnic inferiority, to the relatively covert subtleties of semantic patronization.

Although the Italian-American immigrant group was the subject which was being investigated in this particular instance, it should be noted that other immigrant groups were similarly referred to; often within the same source and context.

Negative citations can be categorized in numerous ways. For example, they might arise as a result of the geographic origin of the ethnic group; attraction to a particular occupation class; peculiarity of custom (dress, food, festivities, etc.); religious or political affiliation; rate of delinquincy, crime, or illiteracy; physical appearance; among others.

In concert with the considerations of categorization one must also be concerned with: a.) the credibility of the literary source; and b.) the Zeitgeist which prevailed. In the latter case, for example, it is easy to account for such statements if they occur in literature published during war years. In the former case, on the other hand, the credentials of the author and the

reputation of the publishing company might help in determining (in a subjective sense, at best) an indication of the scholarly intent of the work.

For our purposes, I have chosen illustrative excerpts in an attempt to communicate the liabilities under which a representative immigrant group had to function with respect to an image reflected by the literature of the day. (The LITERATI VIS-A-VIS the PERSONAE INGRATA, as it were.)

The following evidence is but one facet of the case calling for the institution of ethnic studies curricula in programs of study within America's schools and colleges.

The subtleties of degradation can take form in the seemingly innocuous omission of, or by casually treating the origin of a person of distinguished achievement.

H. B. Coe was very effective in this regard, considering that his volumes were written largely for a Maine-centered, English-American readership.

> "About 1490 there was living in the town an Italian seaman, John Cabot. By birth he was a Genoese, but he had been for some time a naturalized citizen of Venice. Stirred, it is said, by the achievement of Columbus, he appealed to King Henry for leave to make discoveries and for possession of any lands found. His petition was granted, the King reserving a fifth of the receipts from each voyage and the sovereignty of all lands discovered. In May, 1497, Cabot set out in a small vessel with a crew of only eighteen men, most of whom were residents of Bristol. After a voyage of about seven hundred leagues he reached land, probably the island of Cape Breton. In 1498 he made a second voyage, and is thought to have sailed a considerable distance southward. If he did, John Cabot's companions were the first Englishmen to behold the coast of Maine."[2]

In contrast, there exists much documented evidence of not only blatant literary degradation, but also of active, physical discrimination.

For example, according to Iorizzo:

> "What particularly galled the Italian in the South was the personal treatment accorded him. If the Italian immigrant was a second class citizen in many parts of America, he must have been a third class citizen in the South. On the docks of New York an Italian might be called a "dago" or told that it takes two or three of him to make one "white man". In the South, people not only did this but often deprived the Italian of his civil liberties, as they did the Negro."[3]

Specific examples of mob violence in various parts of the country between 1884 and 1915, for example, ranged from simple physical harassment to actual mob lynchings.

The following table should serve to clarify the nature and extent of this ethnic discrimination.

Mob Violence Against Italian-Americans[4]

Date	Location	Number and Condition
12/17/1884	Buena Vista, Pa.	4 killed
3/28/1886	Vicksburg, Miss.	1 lynched
3/14/1891	New Orleans, La.	11 lynched
7/ ?/1893	Denver, Colo.	1 lynched
3/21/1894	Altoona, Pa.	200 driven from city
3/12/1895	Walsenburg, Colo.	6 murdered by mob
8/11/1896	Hahnville, La.	3 lynched
7/20/1899	Tallulah, Miss.	5 lynched
7/11/1901	Erwin, Miss.	5 lynched, 1 wounded
11/18/1901	Marksville, La.	4 driven from city
5/14/1906	Marian, N.C.	2 killed, 5 wounded
9/20/1910	Tampa, Fla.	2 lynched
10/12/1914	Willisville, Ill.	1 shot and killed
6/12/1915	Johnson City, Ill.	1 lynched

Within the parameters encompassing the extremes of subtle and flagrantly obvious discrimination there exist numerous forms of ethnic derogation which might be categorized as: a.) Occupation Class Stereotyping; b.) Stereotyping by Perceived "Natural" Inclination; c.) Stereotyping in terms of Illiteracy, Crime, or Delinquincy; d.) Stereotyping by using a Generally Derogatory Characterization. We shall deal with examples of each of these categories for illustrative purposes.

Occupation Class Stereotyping

As a result of literary citation, members of certain ethnic groups are perceived as being most comfortable within, or most easily identified with a particular occupation role. For example, Wittke states:

> "Popular writers have loved to point out that America was discovered by a "wop" and named after another! Much more important, however, is what the millions of swarthy, picturesquely dressed peasants from sunny Italy who poured into the United States after 1880 did to build American railways, subways, roads, and sewers as gang laborers, and what they and their children have been able to accomplish in America as they rise in the social and economic scale, because of opportunities which few would have enjoyed at home."[5]

and also:

> "Before 1860, Italian immigration consisted largely of vendors of plaster statuary, organ grinders with their monkeys, and political refugees."[6]

or similarly, by Brown and Roucek:

> "By 1850, the urge to come to America had reached lower in the economic scale, and the vanguard of vendors and organ grinders began to arrive."[7]

and again, by Wittke:

> "Italians constitute a large percentage of the membership in the musicians' union. Some Italian bootblacks have prospered to become 'shoe-shine kings,' and now control scores of establishments."[8]

and also, in a sweeping generalization (no pun intended, of course):

> "Many an Italian laborer who returned to Italy took his American shovel along to hand down as an heirloom to his children."[9]

Stereotyping by Custom, Religious or Political Affiliation

Misunderstood ethno-centric traditions and religious or political practices serve as a broad and fertile basis for the promulgation of ethnic bias or, in some cases, racial discrimination.

It seems that certain acts can be very easily "explained away" by simply attaching them to practices which are, at best, superficially understood and merely tolerated. This can be seen in the following.

> "They will tell you with a laugh at the Elizabeth Street Police Station that only a few days ago when a dead goat had been reported lying on Pell Street it was mysteriously missing by the time the offal-cart came to take it away. It turned out that an Italian had carried it off in his sack to a wake or feast of some sort in one of the back alleys."[10]

or in a patronizing manner, as in:

> "Mutual benefit societies participate in the religious and and secular festivities of this pleasure-loving people. Electric-light festoons are stretched across the streets of Italian quarters to celebrate the day sacred to some patron saint. Bands play for these fiestas, and processions, led by the priest, and followed by Italians in quaint native costume, bear holy images through the streets."[11]

Although one would expect to find the greatest incidence of religious misunderstanding on an inter-religion basis as in the following:

> "Great religious festivals not only involved the expenditure of money and time that might well have been used for other purposes but impressed many American observers as manifestations of medieval superstition."[12]

it is not difficult to find documentation attesting to practices of intra-religious discrimination, as can be readily seen in:

"The Italians are not a sensitive people like our own. When they are told that they are about the worst Catholics that ever came to this country they don't resent it or deny it. If they were a little more sensitive to such remarks they would improve faster. The Italians are callous as regards to religion."[13]

and also in:

"Italian clergy and immigrants alike were looked upon with suspicion and hostility. As an Irish pastor remarked: 'Italian priests here must be servants.'"[14]

The following citation carries a political as well as a religious indictment with it.

"With these Slavs and Italians we are getting in our State the continental idea of the Sabbath, the socialist's idea of government, and the communist's idea of property, and the pagan's idea of religion. These ideas are antagonistic to those embodied in our civilization and free institutions..."[15]

Stereotyping by Perceived "Natural" Inclination

Exposition of "natural" inclinations, whether genetically heralded or manifested by the environment, can be used to facilitate a writer's attempt to categorize an ethnic group. This practice is clearly seen in the following statements by Riis:

"Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler."... "Ordinarily he is easily enough governed by authority - always excepting Sunday, when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions."[16]

or again in the same source:

"... he soon reduces what he does find to his own level, if allowed to follow his natural bent. The process can be observed in the Italian tenements in Harlem (Little Italy), which, since their occupation by these people, have been gradually sinking to the slum level."[17]

Reinforcing this concept is Nelli, who points out in "Italians in Urban America," perceptions regarding ethnic predisposition.

"By the same process that many Americans believed Italians to be naturally criminal, contemporaries assumed that certain nationalities were predisposed to a particular occupation because of inborn traits or old world influences."[18]

Stereotyping by Illiteracy, Crime, and Delinquincy

If the factors of illiteracy, crime, and/or delinquincy rate for a given geographic area happen to be high numerically, but not necessarily high in proportion to the general population, certain generalizations can be easily drawn which cast aspersions on ethnic groups amounting to half-truths at best. Such can be seen in Wittke's:

"The South Italians were surpassed only by the Turks and Portuguese in illiteracy. Social life centered around the saloon, the cheap movie, and the dance hall, and the immigrant's most frequent contacts with Americans were through the saloonkeeper, the ward heeler, and the party boss seeking votes."[19]

or, as documented by Nelli, in:

"The illiterate races, such as the Hungarians, Galacians, and Italians, remain in the cities to lower the standards of the already crowded Atlantic territory."[20]

or, more profoundly, in Riis':

"His [the Italian's] ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls." "...The Italian learns slowly, if at all..."[21]

or again, in Wittke's seemingly factual statement:

"The second generation, born and reared in such environments and under great economic stress, broke with many of the old traditions, and their names began to appear on the lists of criminals and delinquents. Crimes of violence ranked especially high among them. The U. S. Army Intelligence Tests gave them a very low rating."[22]

Stereotyping by Derogatory Characterization

The most commonly encountered categorization, which touches upon many of the previously cited areas, is used by writers (unconsciously, I hope)

when personal "glimpses" or "thumbnail" sketches are warranted because of limitations of space or lack of objective data upon which credible observations could have been based. These take form as in Riis':

> "Red bandannas and yellow kerchiefs are everywhere; so is the Italian tongue, infinitely sweeter than the harsh gutterals of the Russian Jew around the corner. So are the 'vistorantes' of innumerable Pasquales; half of the people in 'the Bend' are christened Pasquale, or get the name in some other way. When the police do not know the name of an escaped murderer, they guess at Pasquale and send the name out on alarm; in nine cases out of ten it fits."[23]

in Brown's and Roucek's:

> "The writer will never forget his earliest glimpse of the immigrant at first hand."... "What a motley array of humanity! ... They spoke a jargon of tongues, were dressed in the picturesque suits of their native provinces, and carried their luggage in every conceivable container from gunny sack to battered bag."[24]

and, most obviously, again in Riis':

> "Two old hags, camping on the pavement, are dispensing stale bread, baked not in loaves, but in the shape of big wreaths like exaggerated crullers, out of bags of dirty bedticks."... "Stale bread was the one article the health officers, after a raid on the market, once reported as 'not unwholesome.' It was only disgusting."[25]

Categorization by geographic origin was a bit more subtle but none-the-less derogatory as seen in:

> "The North Italian is an educated, skilled artisan, coming from a manufacturing section and largely from the cities. He is Teutonic in blood and appearance. The South Italian is an illiterate peasant from the great landed estates, with wages less than one-third his northern compatriot. He descends with less mixture from the ancient inhabitants of Italy. Unhappily for us, the North Italians do not come to the United States in considerable numbers, but they betake themselves to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil in about the same numbers as the South Italians come to us."[26]

and also within the same source as:

> "While these North Italians, with their enterprise, intelligence, and varied capacities, go to South America, we re-

> ceive the South Italians, who are nearly the most illerate of all immigrants at the present time, the most subserviant to superiors, the lowest in their standards of living, and at the same time the most industrious and thrifty of all common laborers."[27]

Because a large proportion of writers and speakers between 1890 and 1905 repeated the idea that immigrants, especially illiterate ones [Italian] clung to the slums of large cities, the American public generally accepted this view[28] even though demographers found no evidence that immigrants tend disproportionately toward cities. Derogatory citations to the contrary can be seen in examples such as:

> "[Italians] here promp[illegible]ce conditions of destitution and disorder which, s[illegible]ramework of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach."[29]

also in John Common's:

> "...in the immigrant stage they [Italians] are helpless." ... "The least self-reliant or forehanded, like the ... Italians, seek the cities in greater proportions than those sturdy races (sic) like the Scandinavians, English, Scotch and Germans."[30]

and again in Riis':

> "The [Italian] is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur."[31]

and in:

> "Whenever the back of the sanitary police is turned, he will make his home in the filthy burrows where he works by day, sleeping and eating his meals under the dump, on the edge of slimy depths and amid surroundings full of unutterable horror."[32]

The following examples emphasize the depths to which ethnic degradation can sink. The first, an excerpt from a newspaper:

> "The flood gates are open. The bars are down. The sally-ports are unguarded. The dam is washed away. The sewer is choked ... (sic) the scum of immigration is viscerating upon our shores. The horde of $9.60 steerage slime is being siphoned upon us from Continental mud tanks."[33]

The second, an excerpt from a sociology text published at the turn of the century.

> "Consequently, such extreme types as the Jews and Italians were educated in an almost identical manner. The nervous, flitting, uncertain little Italian received the same treatment as the steady, persevering, plodding little Jew."34

The third, from a religious periodical:

> "They for the most part seem totally devoid of what may be termed the sense of respectability.... The shame of being thought a pauper is almost unknown among the Italian people of this quarter."35

The fourth, from a caption in a commercially-sponsored picture book:

> "Less than ten years ago, these quaint old houses on Macdougal Street were merely Italian tenements. They have now been reclaimed for more artistic purposes."36

and a fifth from Sartorio's text:

> "Hard work, low wages, large families, tenement houses, poor food, and saloons tell the story of the maladjustment of the first and second generations."37

The seemingly positive "back-handed compliment" style of patronization is also used as a derogating device, as can be seen in:

> "The Italians represented a stout-hearted, physically-fit peasantry, whose thrift and industry brought thousands unexpected success."38

and, more offensively, in:

> "With all his conspicuous faults, the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits. He is honest as he is hot-headed."
>
> "The women are faithful wives and devoted mothers. Their vivid and picturesque costumes lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit."
>
> "The Italian is gay, lighthearted and, if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child."39

Conclusion

If one had the time and the patience, it would be disturbingly easy to document additional cases for each of the other "easily-assimilated" ethnic minorities. But what of the not-so-easily assimilated, more readily discernible racial minorities? Needless to say, countless examples exist.

The key issue at hand, then, is centered around the query: What steps can be taken to alleviate future derogation and also to provide members of certain ethnic minorities with the justice of a well-deserved, positive ethnic identity and heritage to look back upon?

Such steps, in fact, are beginning to be taken.

A recent article by Francesco Cordasco which appeared in a recent issue of Intellect magazine[40] is one of many which are beginning to appear in the literature. These publications emphasize the emergence of the new ethnic consciousness among minority groups which has sprung from diverse forces and influences which were manifested during the 1960's.

In "Ethnic Education: Can It Be Relevant" by Philip Perlmutter[41] the teacher's role in perpetuating a greater understanding of ethnicity, which he terms as "the very essence of America," is put forth. The negative attitudes towards ethnic immigrants and their children can be dispelled through formalized curricular programs in the schools and colleges. Specific suggestions which would facilitate the institutions of such programs can be found in the article.

The United States Office of Education recently published regulations in the Federal Register for the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program which has received an appropriation of $2,375,000 which will be distributed during the 1975 fiscal year.

The program, established by Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, authorizes the United States Education Commissioner to make grants and contracts to assist in "planning, developing, establishing, and operating ethnic heritage studies programs." Each program assisted is to develop curriculum materials in elementary and secondary schools or institutions of higher education, "relating to the history, geography, society, economy, literature, art, music, drama, language, and general culture of the group or groups with which the program is concerned, and the contributions of that ethnic group or groups to the American heritage."[42]

The time has come for educators to begin to utilize the diverse cultural backgrounds of our students as a vehicle to enrich American society because of - not in spite of, their ethnic heritage.

Notes

[1]A humanities project supported by the Maine Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities, January, 1974, through June, 1974.

[2]H. B. Coe (Editor), Maine: A History Vol. I (New York: The Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1928), p. 18.

[3]Luciano Iorizzo, "The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution," in The Italian Experience in the United States by Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engel (Eds.) (Staten Island, N.Y.: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc., 1970), p. 49.

[4]Ibid., adapted from numerous letters, newspaper accounts, etc.

[5]Carl Wittke, We Who Built America (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940), p. 435.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Francis J. Brown and Joseph S. Roucek, One America (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), p. 258

[8]Wittke, p. 439

[9]Wittke, p. 438

[10]Jacob A. Riis, How The Other Half Lives (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894), p. 58.

[11]Wittke, p. 441.

[12]Wittke, pp. 439-440.

[13]Letter dated March 4, 1917, Rev. B. J. Reilley to Cardinal Farley, Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York. (AANY) Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[14]Silvano M. Tomasi, "The Ethnic Church," The Italian Experience In The United States (Staten Island, N.Y.: The Center for Migration Studies, Inc., 1970), p. 167.

[15]John Dixon, D.D., "The Synodical Home Mission in Pennsylvania," The Assembly Herald, (Vol. XIII, No. 3, March, 1907), p. 117. Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[16]Riis, p. 52.

[17]Riis, p. 48.

[18]Humbert S. Nelli, "Italians In Urban America," in The Italian Experience in America, op. cit., p. 100.

[19]Wittke, p. 439.

[20]Nelli, p. 83.

[21]Riis, p. 49.

[22]Wittke, p. 438.

[23]Riis, p. 60.

[24]Brown and Roucek, p. 260.

[25]Riis, p. 57.

[26]John R. Commons, Races and Immigrants In America (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1930), p. 78.

[27]Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[28]Frank Thistlethwaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Population Movements in Modern European History by Herbert Moller (Ed.) (New York, 1964); Walter F. Willcox, Studies in American Demography (Ithaca, 1940), pp. 159, 169, 174. Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[29]Riis, p. 48.

[30]Commons, pp. 133, 166.

[31]Riis, p. 48.

[32]Riis, p. 52.

[33]Newspaper excerpt cited by Robert F. Foerster, The Italian Emigration of our Times (Cambridge: 1919). Second source, Wittke, op. cit., p. 440.

[34]Thomas J. Jones, The Sociology of a New York City Block (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1904), pp. 127-128.

[35]Bernard J. Lynch, "The Italians in New York," The Catholic World, (Vol. XLVII, April, 1888), p. 68. Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[36]Caption from a photograph in New York in 1923, The New York Edison Co. (New York: The Marchbanks Press, 1923).

[37]Enrico Sartorio, Social and Religious Life of Italians in America (Boston, 1918). Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[38]Antonio Stella, Some Aspects of Italian Immigration to the United States (New York: 1924), p. 38. Second source, Tomasi, op. cit.

[39]Riis, p. 53.

[40]Francesco Cordasco, "The Children of Columbus: The New Italian-American Ethnic Historiography," Intellect (Vol. 102, No. 2356, March, 1974), pp. 377-379.

[41]Philip Perlmutter, "Ethnic Education: Can it be Relevant," The Massachusetts Teacher (Vol. LIII, No. 5, February, 1974), pp. 36-39.

[42]From Higher Education and National Affairs (Washington: American Council on Education, February 22, 1974), p. 2.